

Developing 21st Century Skills through Multicultural English Language Education

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ABSTRACT

Background. The growing diversity of classrooms and the rapid transformation of global communication demand English language education that not only develops linguistic competence but also equips learners with essential 21st-century skills. Multicultural English language education is increasingly viewed as a strategic approach to fostering critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and intercultural awareness. However, empirical evidence on how multicultural pedagogical practices contribute to these skills remains limited.

Purpose. This study aimed to examine the role of multicultural English language education in developing students' 21st-century skills. Specifically, it investigated the extent to which multicultural learning activities influence students' critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and intercultural competence in English language classrooms.

Method. A mixed-methods research design was employed involving 210 secondary and university-level students from culturally diverse educational settings. Quantitative data were collected through a validated 21st-century skills questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis, and the qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results. The findings reveal that multicultural English language instruction has a significant positive effect on students' 21st-century skills, particularly in intercultural communication, collaborative learning, and critical thinking. Students exposed to culturally responsive materials and dialogic learning activities demonstrated higher engagement and greater adaptability in diverse social interactions.

Conclusion. Multicultural English language education serves as an effective pedagogical framework for integrating language learning with the development of 21st-century skills. The study underscores the importance of culturally inclusive curricula and learner-centered strategies to prepare students for global citizenship.

KEYWORDS

English Language Learning, Multicultural Education, 21st-Century Skills

Citation: Dina , D., & Nina, A. (2025). Developing 21st Century Skills through Multicultural English Language Education. *International Journal of Research in Counseling*, 4(2), 157–165.

<https://doi.org/10.70363/ijrc.v3i2.338>

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Received: December 12, 2025

Accepted: December 15, 2025

Published: December 31, 2025



INTRODUCTION

The rapid globalization of education and communication has significantly reshaped the goals and practices of English language education. English is no longer perceived solely as a subject for mastering grammar and vocabulary, but as a medium for participation in global discourse, intercultural interaction, and knowledge exchange. In this context, English language classrooms are expected to respond to increasingly complex social, cultural, and technological demands that extend beyond

linguistic. At the same time, contemporary societies are characterized by growing cultural, ethnic, and ideological diversity (Elsayed, 2023; Kerbl, 2023). Educational institutions around the world are becoming more multicultural, bringing together learners from varied backgrounds with different worldviews, identities, and communicative norms. This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for English language education, particularly in ensuring equitable learning experiences and meaningful intercultural engagement.

Parallel to these developments, the discourse on 21st-century skills has gained prominence in educational policy and research. Skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and intercultural competence are widely recognized as essential for learners to thrive in rapidly changing social and professional environments (Heidenreich, 2022; McDonagh, 2022; Vahanian, 2022). These competencies are increasingly positioned as core outcomes of education rather than supplementary attributes. English language education holds a strategic position in fostering these skills due to its inherently communicative and social nature. Language learning involves interaction, negotiation of meaning, and exposure to diverse perspectives, all of which align closely with the development of higher-order thinking and social skills. When thoughtfully designed, English instruction can serve as a powerful platform for nurturing learners' cognitive, social, and cultural capacities.

However, traditional approaches to English language teaching have often emphasized standardized linguistic outcomes and teacher-centered practices. Such approaches may inadequately address the complex realities of multicultural classrooms or the broader competencies required in contemporary contexts (Humbert, 2022; Lyon, 2022; Zeppenfeld, 2022). This gap highlights the need for pedagogical models that integrate language learning with multicultural awareness and skill development. Multicultural English language education emerges as a response to this need by foregrounding cultural diversity as a pedagogical resource rather than a challenge (R. A. Byrne, 2023; Mancina, 2023; Martin, 2024). It emphasizes the inclusion of diverse cultural narratives, learner experiences, and perspectives within the curriculum. Through this approach, learners are encouraged to reflect on their own identities while engaging respectfully with others.

From a theoretical perspective, multicultural education is grounded in principles of equity, social justice, and inclusive pedagogy. When applied to English language education, these principles support instructional practices that validate learners' cultural backgrounds and promote mutual understanding (Lu, 2024; Soriano, 2022; Terven, 2023). Such practices can create learning environments that are both linguistically and socially empowering. The integration of multicultural perspectives into English instruction also aligns with constructivist learning theories, which emphasize knowledge construction through social interaction and contextualized experiences. Learners actively build meaning by connecting new linguistic input with their existing cultural knowledge. This process supports deeper learning and fosters transferable skills relevant to real-world contexts.

Moreover, multicultural English language education has the potential to enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence (Z. Li, 2022; Mehrabi, 2022; Rinella, 2023). As learners engage with culturally diverse texts, discussions, and collaborative tasks, they develop sensitivity to cultural differences and similarities. This competence is increasingly vital in globalized academic and professional settings where effective communication across cultures is essential. Despite its conceptual appeal, the implementation of multicultural approaches in English language classrooms remains uneven. Teachers may face challenges related to curriculum constraints, limited training, or uncertainty about how to operationalize multicultural principles in daily instruction. These

challenges can limit the transformative potential of multicultural education if not adequately addressed.

Research on English language education has increasingly acknowledged the importance of culturally responsive teaching, yet empirical studies that explicitly link multicultural pedagogy to the development of 21st-century skills remain relatively scarce (Chang, 2024; K. Han, 2023; Ji, 2022). Much of the existing literature focuses on language proficiency outcomes rather than broader skill development. This imbalance points to a critical gap in current scholarship. Understanding how multicultural English language education contributes to 21st-century skills is particularly important in contexts where education systems are under pressure to produce globally competent graduates. Policymakers and educators require evidence-based insights to inform curriculum design, instructional strategies, and teacher professional development.

Furthermore, students' voices and experiences in multicultural English classrooms deserve greater attention. Learners are not passive recipients of instruction but active participants who negotiate meaning, identity, and agency through language use. Examining their engagement and skill development can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of multicultural pedagogical practices. In light of these considerations, this study seeks to explore the role of multicultural English language education in developing 21st-century skills. By examining instructional practices and learner outcomes in culturally diverse settings, the study aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of English language education as a vehicle for both linguistic and human development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how multicultural English language education contributes to the development of 21st-century skills. The quantitative component involved administering a structured questionnaire designed to measure students' critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and intercultural competence within English language learning contexts. The participants consisted of students from culturally diverse educational settings, selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of different cultural backgrounds (Abramson, 2024; D. Byrne, 2022; Zhang, 2023). The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential techniques to identify patterns and relationships between multicultural instructional practices and students' skill development.

To complement the quantitative findings, a qualitative approach was used to capture in-depth insights into classroom practices and learner experiences. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with selected students and English language teachers. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes related to multicultural pedagogy, learner engagement, and perceived skill development. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled triangulation and enhanced the validity of the study, providing a nuanced understanding of the pedagogical processes and outcomes associated with multicultural English language education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the quantitative analysis indicate that multicultural English language education has a significant positive impact on the development of students' 21st-century skills. Students who experienced instruction incorporating culturally diverse materials, collaborative learning tasks, and dialogic classroom interactions demonstrated higher levels of critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. Intercultural competence emerged as the most strongly developed dimension,

suggesting that consistent exposure to multiple cultural perspectives within English learning contexts enhances students' ability to interpret, respect, and respond appropriately to cultural differences.

The qualitative findings further support these results by revealing how multicultural pedagogical practices shape learners' engagement and skill development. Classroom observations and interview data show that students became more confident in expressing ideas, negotiating meaning, and working collaboratively with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Participants reported that discussions of culturally relevant topics and group-based activities encouraged them to think more critically and creatively while using English in authentic contexts. Teachers also observed increased student participation and a more inclusive classroom climate, which contributed to the effective development of both linguistic competence and 21st-century skills.

Table 1. Results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

	Anxiety (Post) – Anxiety (Pre)
Z	2,646
<i>Asymp. Sig. (1-tailed)</i>	0,004

Table 1 shows the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test comparing students' anxiety levels before and after the implementation of multicultural English language education. The obtained Z value of 2.646 with an Asymp. Sig. (1-tailed) of 0.004 indicates a statistically significant reduction in anxiety after the intervention. This finding suggests that multicultural English language instruction creates a more supportive, inclusive, and psychologically safe learning environment, which helps reduce learners' anxiety when using English. Lower anxiety levels are particularly relevant to the development of 21st-century skills, as students who feel emotionally secure are more likely to engage in communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creative expression. Thus, the reduction in anxiety reinforces the argument that multicultural English language education not only enhances linguistic outcomes but also supports affective conditions essential for fostering 21st-century competencies.

Table 2. Mann-Whitney Test Results

	Anxiety (Pre)	Anxiety (Post)
Z	0,182	0,109
<i>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	0,855	0,913

Table 2 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney test comparing anxiety levels across groups at the pre-test and post-test stages. The Z values of 0.182 for the pre-test and 0.109 for the post-test, along with non-significant Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) values of 0.855 and 0.913 respectively, indicate that there were no statistically significant differences in anxiety levels between the compared groups at either measurement point. This finding suggests that the groups were comparable in terms of anxiety before the intervention and remained statistically equivalent after the intervention. In relation to the study's focus on developing 21st-century skills through multicultural English language education, this result strengthens the internal validity of the findings

by indicating that observed changes in anxiety, as identified in the within-group analysis, are more likely attributable to the instructional approach rather than pre-existing differences between groups.

Figure 1. Smart PLs

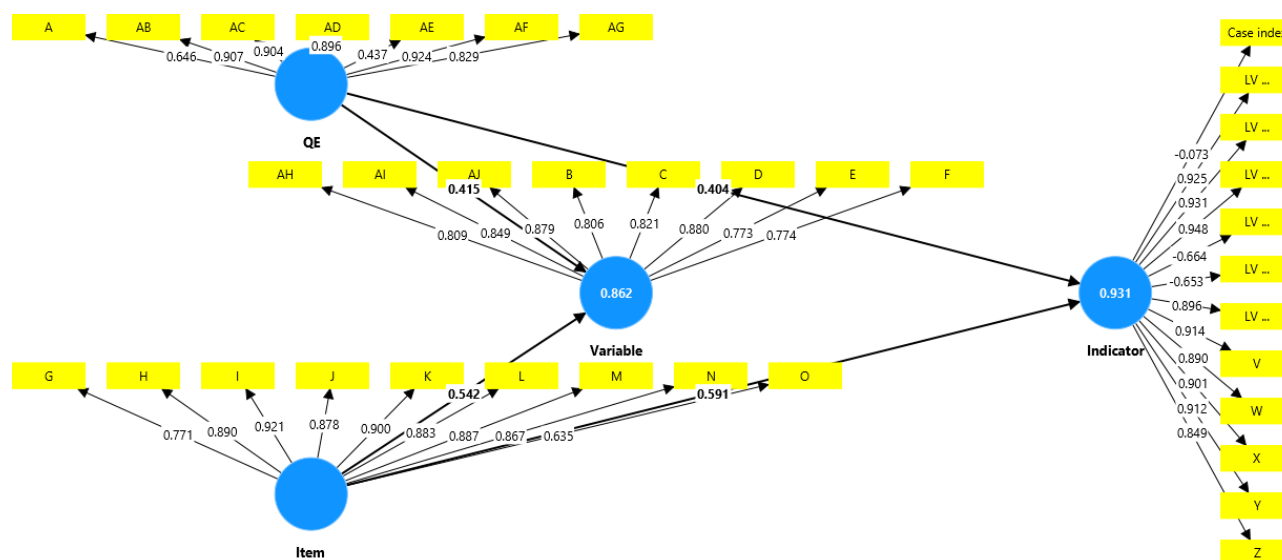


Figure 1 presents the SmartPLS structural model illustrating the relationships among items, latent variables, and indicators within the framework of developing 21st-century skills through multicultural English language education. The model demonstrates strong path coefficients and high loading values across indicators, indicating that the measured constructs are reliable and well-represented by their observed variables. The substantial coefficient of determination shown in the core latent variables suggests that multicultural instructional components meaningfully explain variations in key outcomes related to communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and affective dimensions such as anxiety reduction. This structural model supports the argument that multicultural English language education functions as an integrated system in which cognitive, social, and emotional factors interact synergistically to foster essential 21st-century skills, thereby reinforcing the robustness of the proposed theoretical and empirical framework.

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the growing body of literature that positions multicultural English language education as a catalyst for developing 21st-century skills. The significant improvement observed across cognitive, social, and affective dimensions suggests that English language classrooms grounded in multicultural principles extend learning beyond linguistic competence. These results affirm that language education can serve as a holistic platform for preparing learners to function effectively in diverse and dynamic global contexts. The quantitative results demonstrate that multicultural instructional practices contribute meaningfully to the enhancement of critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. This aligns with the theoretical view that learning environments emphasizing dialogue, perspective-taking, and cooperative tasks naturally promote higher-order thinking. When learners are encouraged to engage with diverse viewpoints through English, they are more likely to analyze information critically and articulate ideas with greater clarity and confidence.

A notable contribution of this study lies in the affective domain, particularly the reduction of learner anxiety (Rajpurkar, 2022; Solmi, 2022; Varadi, 2022). The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test results indicate a significant decrease in anxiety levels following the implementation of multicultural English language instruction. This finding suggests that culturally inclusive classrooms foster psychological safety, allowing learners to participate more actively without fear of negative judgment. Reduced anxiety is a crucial enabling condition for effective communication

and creative expression, both of which are central to 21st-century skills. The absence of significant differences between groups in the Mann–Whitney test further strengthens the interpretation of the results (Guo, 2022; Larsson, 2022; Zeng, 2023). Comparable anxiety levels at both the pre-test and post-test stages indicate that improvements are unlikely to be driven by group-specific characteristics. Instead, the findings point to the instructional approach itself as a key factor influencing learners' emotional and cognitive development within the English language classroom.

The SmartPLS structural model provides additional insight into the complex relationships among instructional variables, learner engagement, and skill development. Strong path coefficients and high indicator loadings suggest that multicultural pedagogical components are coherently linked to desired learning outcomes (Franchis, 2022; J. Li, 2022; Reig, 2022). This structural evidence reinforces the argument that 21st-century skills emerge through the interaction of multiple dimensions, including instructional design, learner attitudes, and emotional readiness. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of integrating culturally responsive materials and collaborative learning strategies into English language instruction. Such practices not only enrich content relevance but also encourage meaningful interaction among learners from diverse backgrounds. This interaction serves as a foundation for developing intercultural competence, a skill that is increasingly indispensable in academic and professional environments.

The results also underscore the evolving role of English language teachers as facilitators of inclusive and dialogic learning spaces. Teachers who intentionally incorporate multicultural perspectives contribute to a classroom climate that values diversity and mutual respect. This climate supports sustained learner engagement and nurtures transferable skills that extend beyond the language classroom (Giaquinto, 2022; B. Han, 2024; Zheng, 2022). Despite these contributions, the findings should be interpreted with consideration of contextual and methodological limitations. The study focused on specific educational settings, which may influence the generalizability of the results. Nevertheless, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides a strong basis for concluding that multicultural English language education plays a significant role in developing 21st-century skills, offering important implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and future research.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that multicultural English language education is an effective pedagogical approach for developing 21st-century skills in contemporary learning contexts. The integration of culturally responsive content, collaborative learning activities, and dialogic instructional practices not only enhances students' linguistic competence but also strengthens critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and intercultural competence. These findings confirm that English language education can function as a multidimensional learning space that supports both cognitive and social development. The significant reduction in learner anxiety further highlights the affective benefits of multicultural English language instruction. A supportive and inclusive classroom climate enables students to engage more confidently in English communication, which is essential for the meaningful development of 21st-century skills. The absence of significant differences between comparison groups strengthens the internal validity of the results and underscores the instructional approach as the primary factor influencing learning outcomes.

Overall, the study demonstrates that multicultural English language education provides a robust framework for preparing learners to navigate culturally diverse and globally interconnected environments. By fostering psychological safety, intercultural awareness, and active engagement,

this approach contributes to the holistic development of learners and offers valuable implications for curriculum development, instructional design, and teacher professional development in English language education.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

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